

**Sermon preached by the Rt Rev'd James Langstaff,
Bishop to Prisons and Bishop of Rochester
Sunday 15th October 2017, 10.00am Choral Eucharist for
Prisons Week at St Edmundsbury Cathedral**

Texts: Jeremiah 29.11-14; Romans 8.31-39; Matthew 7.7-11

“A future with hope” is held out as part of the Lord’s plan for his people, “welfare and not harm”. Words from Jeremiah 29 which follow on from where God speaks through the prophet to his people experiencing the imprisonment of exile – not incarceration in quite the same way as being held in custody, but clearly a prison-like experience of being taken away to an unwanted place, held there against their will. To those people God sends the exhortation to seek the welfare of the place where they are, not least by praying for it.

Prisons Week is above all a week of prayer for all who are (willingly or not) connected to the criminal justice system. And we do indeed bring our prayers for those in prison, all who are victims of crime, the families of both offenders and victims; with them for our communities affected by the reality and the fear of crime, for all who work in prisons, with former offenders and in the wider criminal justice world. We pray for the welfare of all of these. In the gospel Jesus encourages us to ask of God, trusting that our Father in heaven is one who wishes to give good things to

those who ask. And so we dare to ask, to search, to knock, that we may receive, and find that doors will be opened.

The imagery of doors (and indeed of gates) is very strong for any who have been in prison - in most prisons, a constant banging of doors, clanging of gates, clinking of keys. I remember my wife, who was once Head of Healthcare at HMP Long Lartin, telling me of having to unlock and lock 8 or more gates in order to get from the main gate to her office. And so we pray that doors may be opened; for the opening of those doors that lead into places of redemption and restoration, of forgiveness and healing, of opportunity and contribution – in short, doors that lead to a future with hope, a future with hope for all.

Despite increased efforts by the Parole Board and others, and despite such sentences having been discontinued five years ago, we still have in our prisons over 3,000 people held under what is call Imprisonment for Public Protection. These sentences are effectively without time limit, even though for many they have now been in prison for way over the normal maximum term for the offence they committed. While a very few people may need to be in prison until the end of their life, these prisoners are by and large not among them. Some are there because they continue to deny their guilt and so do not get parole; others because in various

ways they do not satisfy parole requirements. Yet, even those, had they not had the IPP label attached, would have been freed by now. A future with hope? Not really.

And even beyond that particular set of prisoners, hope is a commodity it is often hard to find in the world of criminal behaviour. For prisoners the loss of hope may be very obvious; but think too of their families, their children – one study has shown that 63% of the male children of prisoners go on to offend themselves. What hope for them? And what about our communities, including the victims of crime within them? Where is hope for them if so many of those who leave our prisons then re-offend, in part at least because prison has not worked for them – it has not helped them to address their behaviour and change. Only this week, the Head of the Prison and Probation Service has acknowledged that the reforms of a few years ago to probation and rehabilitation services delivered in the community are not working. A future with hope?

And yet there is hope. On Monday this week, under the banner of the PrisonHope initiative, we launched at Lambeth Palace a book called *40 Stories of Hope*. In a way that might be used in Lent or at another time by individuals or groups – and will certainly be used in many prisons – this book gathers 40 stories about those

who have been transformed while in prison. Specifically, these are people whose lives have been transformed by encounter with God in Jesus Christ. And their stories are part of a wider story about those who, in and through the experience of prison, change in significant ways. Those who, through such things as Prison Fellowship's *Sycamore Tree* programme, address their behaviour and its effects on them, their victims, their families and others. Those who, through things like the innovative family programmes at HMP Parc, re-engage with their parental responsibilities and so help to break that dreadful cycle of intergenerational criminality. Those who, through engaging with education and training, develop new skills which fit them to live productive lives on the outside when they complete their sentences. And of course those for whom the change is in the form of a new or rekindled faith – and praise God that there are many of those.

But what happens when that main gate opens, and the person who has undergone transformation emerges into the world outside? Where are the employers who will give a job to a former offender? Where are the housing providers who will offer accommodation? Where are the people who will be family to a former offender who may have no family? Where is the care and support for the many who emerge with mental health struggles? Where are the

churches that will welcome the ex-offender? All that and more needs to be in place if there is truly to be a future with hope.

I thank God that there are many who seek to offer just that as prisoners emerge from prison, and who thereby help to reduce the risk of re-offending. Among them are a number of church-based and other initiatives and organisations which offer friendship, mentoring, practical help over housing, lodgings even, job application support, jobs. Some of these are household names like Timpsons and Halfords; much is small and local, but quietly effective. The Welcome Directory is a newish initiative to work with churches, such that they become ex-offender friendly and are known to be so – we need many more to join. Thus may there indeed be a future with hope.

Our prison service and indeed the whole system is under huge pressure at the moment; prison numbers, loss of staff over recent years, poor quality older buildings, changing demography of the prison population – all these factors and more make things very difficult, not least for prison staff. The Prison Governors' Association, HM Chief Inspectors of Prisons and of Probation and many others have been very public about the issues in recent days.

To see a future with hope is not easy, but listen to St Paul as he faces what must have seemed like insurmountable obstacles.

Nothing, he avers, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And to the people in the despair of exile comes that word about God's plans for welfare and not for harm – the promise of a future with hope. And so, as Prisons Week urges us this year, we press on. We press on in seeking transformation, we press on in working for the things of justice and righteousness, we press on to offer hope and opportunity, and especially we press on in prayer to our God who delights to give good things to those who ask.